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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the strategies used at the University of Puerto Rico (Humacao) to overcome limitations resulting from a low response rate to their alumni surveys. Evaluation of earlier experiences with alumni studies led to identification of two principles for effective alumni studies: (1) the alumni study has to be a collaborative effort between the faculty in the academic programs and the institutional researchers, and (2) graduates' loyalty is more to their faculty and their programs than the institution as a whole. The revised approach utilized a questionnaire evaluating both the institution and the specific program. It addition to the questionnaire, the approach used focus groups and personal interviews. Findings indicated: increases in response rates from 28 percent to 41 percent for one-year graduates and from 12 percent to 33 percent for three-year graduates; increases in faculty participation from 6 departments (46 percent) to 12 departments (92 percent), and implementation of a new institutional study of employers and graduate schools. (Contains 30 references and 7 tables.) (DB)

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OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGE OF LOW RESPONSE RATE IN ALUMNI SURVEYS

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Dolores Vura
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OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGE OF LOW RESPONSE RATE IN ALUMNI SURVEYS

Abstract

Since the mid-1980s our institution has developed an alumni survey as part of its student tracking system. From the beginning, the alumni survey was the most challenging component of that research. In spite of our efforts, we are still struggling to have an efficient mechanism that would give us accurate information about our former students' college experience, their assessment of the institution and of their academic preparation. A major challenge in this effort has been the low response rate.

We want to share with the audience the combination of strategies we have been implementing to overcome the limitations of the study, the results we have achieved so far, and our next steps to improve this research.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGE OF LOW RESPONSE RATE IN ALUMNI SURVEYS

As in many American colleges, assessment was an incipient activity at the University of Puerto Rico in the early 1980s. Our planning offices were incorporating institutional research functions on a small scale, mainly as a random, unarticulated activity to document some areas of the academic life; such as: program demand, job opportunities for our majors, and institutional statistics. But, as Terenzini (Stark, 1994, p. 523) points out, at this stage many of those efforts were not coordinated in any way and were not part of any comprehensive, institutional plan for ongoing systematic self-study and improvement.

With the switch to strategic planning, the need for systematic collection of information to document the institution's competitive advantage over the others became evident. George Keller (1983) had stated: "Before any college or university executives begin to shape an academic strategy, they need to gather the proper information on which to base the strategy... Information, quality, and people: these are the critical items for strategic planning to be effective."[1] Keller acknowledged that most institutions lacked information on student outcomes and referred to the work of Alexander Astin, in UCLA, as a pioneering effort in providing information about the student experience in College. The works of Astin (1977), Lenning (1977, 1980), Bowen (1980), Ewell (1983, 1984), among others, influenced the early stages of data collection in Humacao.

Our first systematic institutional research project was the Student Tracking System initiated in 1984-85. Under the leadership of the Central Administration Office, the Systemic Committee for Institutional Studies gathered the representatives from the eleven (11) units of our university System. Collaboratively, the group developed and pilot-tested the different instruments that would comprise the Humacao Student Tracking System.

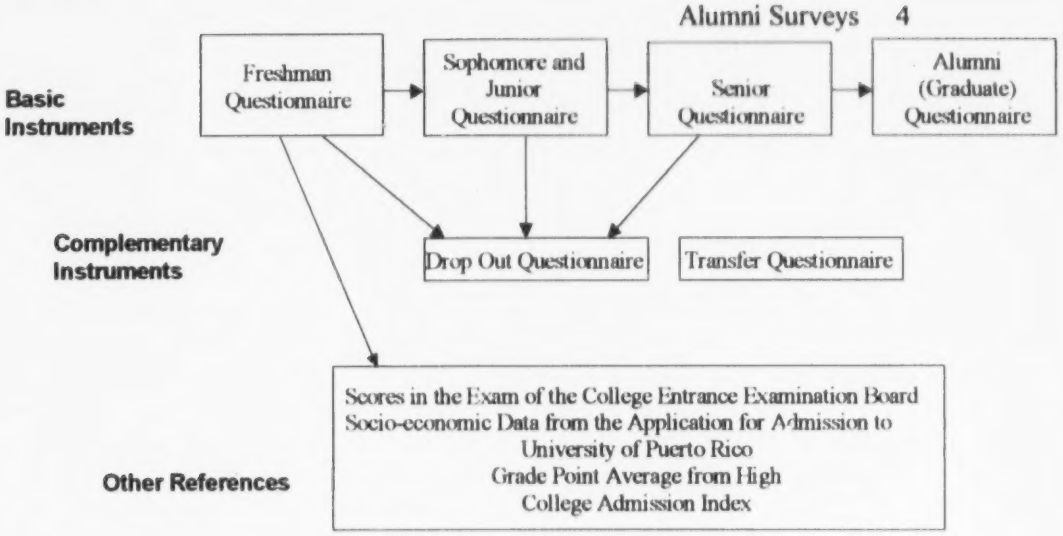
Basic Instruments
Freshman Questionnaire
Sophomore and Junior Questionnaire
Senior Questionnaire
Alumni (Graduate) Questionnaire
Complementary Instruments
Drop Out Questionnaire
Transfer Questionnaire
Other References
Scores in the Exam of the College Entrance Examination Board
Socio-economic Data from the Application for Admission to University of Puerto Rico
Grade Point Average from High
College Admission Index

Figure 1: Student Tracking System at the University in Humacao

The main goal of this longitudinal research project was to provide an objective mechanism to measure the students' expectations, achievements, and difficulties throughout their experience on the institution. We wanted to find out who entered the college, what they expected from it, and how well we helped them achieve their expectations. This would become our institutional assessment project and eventually one of the elements of our institutional effectiveness and outcomes assessment project.

An important component of this project was the alumni survey. From the beginning, this was the most challenging aspect of our research. In spite of our efforts, we were still struggling to have an efficient mechanism that would give us accurate information about our former students' college experience as well as their assessment of the institution and of their academic preparation.

This paper presents the combination of strategies we have been implementing from 1996-97 to the present to overcome the limitations of our alumni study, the results we have achieved so far, and our next steps to improve this research.

The Alumni Study

Historical Background

Humacao began the Student Tracking System in August1984 and by June 1987 we were mailing questionnaires to our associate degree graduates. Until 1991 we surveyed groups both one-year and three-years after graduation. With the first groups we did one mailing with two or three follow-ups, only to those students who were part of the track we were following from the freshmen

years. This accounted for initial high response rates ranging from 58 to 74 percent. But when the number of graduates increased our response rates fell dramatically below 20%. Eventually, in 1991-92, we stopped our alumni research.

For a period of almost eight years, we relied on two other sources of information on student outcomes: the graduating class questionnaire performed at institutional level, and the alumni studies prepared by some of the academic departments. However, there were a few problems with this strategy.

Despite the fact that we had in place a good graduation instrument for our seniors, we felt that we were missing valuable information concerning our graduates' performance in their jobs and at graduate level. Our seniors gave us good feedback in terms of their experience throughout their college years, valuable assessment of student support services and of the College environment, and some general information in terms of their satisfaction with their programs, their faculty, and the quality of the teaching-learning process. But we did not hear from them beyond the graduation point.

Some of our programs with external accreditation managed to survey employers and their own alumni to find out whether they were employed or studying at graduate level. But this was on a very small scale and only for accreditation purposes.

In 1994, our Chancellor and the institutional researcher attended James Nichols' workshop "Institutional Effectiveness and Student Outcomes Assessment", in Nashville, Tennessee.[2] The Chancellor decided to adopt the institutional effectiveness paradigm which focuses on assessing student outcomes as a means to document the achievement of academic and service objectives as well as broader institutional goals and mission. An important component of that assessment should be the feedback of graduates, their employers as well as the graduate schools that admit them for graduate work.

A third reason for reinitiating our alumni study was our college accreditation. Humacao would have the visit of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools in the Spring of 1999 (due to Hurricane Georges it was postponed for the Fall of 1999). From our previous accreditation in 1988-89, we knew that the Middle States Association includes outcomes assessment as the core of the accreditation process. This time they emphasized student outcomes even more (1991, 1994, 1996, 1998). Thus in 1996-97 we reinitiated our alumni study.

Methodology

We had learned a couple of lessons from our previous experience and from the experience of other researchers with this same topic.

Lesson #1: The Alumni Study had to be a collaborative effort between the faculty in the academic programs and the institutional researchers. The first decision we made was to include academic departments in this effort in order to collect both the institutional assessment and the program assessment. We organized the Institutional Committee for the Alumni Study (See Figure 2) with a representative from each academic department. The representatives were either the Program Coordinators, the Academic Advisors, or a faculty member designated by the Department Chair.

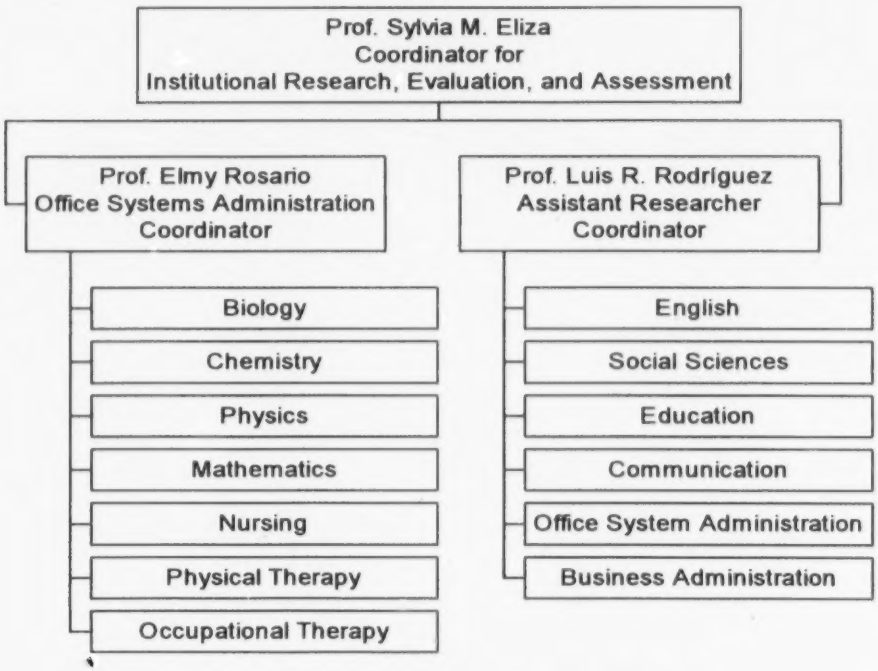

Figure 2: Institutional Committee for the Alumni Study

As part of this effort, the Assessment Program hired one Faculty member who would share coordinating responsibilities with the Assistant Researcher from the Institutional Research Division. These two coordinators would be in charge of providing the leadership and the technical assistance the departments needed to initiate the study.

Specifically, the Alumni Committee would:

1. Review previous alumni questionnaires used at institutional and department level

2. Produce a revised instrument which would collect both the data needed by the Institution and by each department, thus the information could be grouped in one institutional profile and segregated by academic department.

3. Prepare the alumni directory

4. Mail the questionnaire

5. Prepare the Alumni Profile for each department

Lesson #2: Graduates' loyalty is to their faculty and their programs. We had witnessed that graduates responded fairly well to the surveys sent by their specific programs, especially those which received external accreditation. Social Work, Nursing (associate and bachelor's degrees), Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy conducted their alumni and employers surveys on a regular basis with response rates over the 40%.

We realized that this was one of the major limitations of our previous study. Our graduates could not relate to us, the institutional researchers, as well as they did to their professors. Thus, we would seek the assistance of the Program Coordinators in the Committee for sending, following up, and collecting questionnaires.

Besides knowledge gained from experience, there were two other factors that promised to help us to be successful in this new attempt. First of all, there were three of us sharing the research responsibility instead of one single researcher. Second, we were all more experienced researchers. This would allow us to try out other research methodologies besides the mail-in survey.

This second cycle of the Alumni Study includes Humacao University College graduates from 1995, 1993/1996, and 1994/1997.

The 1995 Alumni Study includes a random sample of 100 graduates stratified by academic programs who, by 1996-97, had completed one year away from the College. Those graduates represent 17% of their class. We mailed them the Alumni Questionnaire that includes twenty-two questions. There was one additional follow up.

The 1993/1996 Alumni Study was a little more ambitious. Instead of one group we decided to approach two classes: 1993 graduates who had been away for three years and 1996 graduates who had been out for one year. Instead of samples, we sent the survey to the universe of graduates: the 593 for the 1993 class and 671 for the 1996. Besides the survey we wanted to conduct focus groups. The members of the Institutional Committee mailed the questionnaires and helped us with their follow-up and collection. We sent the questionnaire to the graduates from the three departments which had not developed the program assessment section. Graduates received a follow-up by telephone.

The 1994/1997 Alumni Study is the last one in this second cycle. Again we surveyed one year and three year graduates. Our conclusion after analyzing the findings for the other two studies was that we could get about the same results with a random, stratified sample. Thus, for 1994/97 we chose a random sample stratified by academic programs with a margin error of .03% and a

confidence level of 99%. We used Cheby Sheff's theorem for calculating the sample. Out of 13 academic departments, 12 (92%) prepared the program assessment section. The Coordinators of the Study mailed the questionnaires.

We also conducted focus groups. From the sample for the survey of each class, we chose another sample for the focus groups. From the 1994 class we chose 25 graduates; from the 1997 class we chose 30. The Assistant Researcher contacted each graduate by telephone and confirmed his/her attendance to the group interviews. He mailed the Alumni Questionnaire and a letter reminding them of the date for the focus group.

We also did a Graduate Schools and Employer Study to complement the Alumni Study. It used personal interviews as research technique. We interviewed a random sample of employers and a sample group of graduate schools. To prepare the Employers Directory we used the telephone guide. In the phone book for the Humacao Region we identified 4,298 possible employers. We stratified the universe by economic sector. Then we chose a random stratified sample of 405 employers with .05% margin of error and 95% level of confidence. Since we wanted to use personal interviews as research technique, we decided to interview only a 5% of that sample. Randomly we picked 24 companies for the interviews. Each company was contacted by telephone and the appointment for the interview was set.

To make the Graduate Schools directory, we interviewed Department Chairs and faculty members from each program in our College which kept contact with their graduates. We prepared a list of the graduate schools our former students attended. At this point we were running out of time and decided to work with a small group of them just to have an idea about how they perceived our graduates. Out of 86 graduate schools identified, we contacted 5 on the phone. As with employers, we set an appointment for the interviews.

Results:

Alumni Questionnaire. Table 1 presents the response data for the three mail-in surveys.

Table 1

Distribution of Response for Alumni Studies 1995, 1993/1996, and 1994/1997

Graduation Class	Total of Graduates	Sample	Total of Response	%
1995 (1 year)	594	100	28	28
1996 (1 year)	671	--	136	20
1997 (1 year)	617	259	106	41
1993 (3 years)	593	--	70	12
1994 (3 years)	615	259	87	33

The results of the 1995 Alumni Study were unexpected. Out of 13 departments, only 6 (46%) developed the program assessment section. Therefore, most of the graduates only received the institutional assessment survey. Only 28% out of a sample of 100 graduates completed the questionnaire (see Table 1). We worked for a higher response rate. But we were not discouraged because we had decided to try new ways to improve the response.

In 1997-98, we tried to accomplish the following goals:

1. increase the number of programs participating in the study

2. increase the response rate

3. survey two groups simultaneously: former students who had been away after graduation for one year and for three years

We accomplished two of the three goals proposed. Out of 13 academic departments, 10 developed the program assessment section. This represents 4 more than the previous year. We also accomplished the study of two cohorts of graduates simultaneously. The response, however, did not increase. There was a 12% of response for 1993 graduates and a 20% for those of 1996. Compared to the previous study of one-year graduates, the percentage decreased by 8%.

The addition of more departments in the study required a greater effort to respond to the needs of each program in the stage of constructing the instruments. Therefore we postponed the focus groups.

For 1994/1997 we worked with samples. As Table 1 shows, the response of one-year graduates increased to 41%; this is 21% higher than the response for the 1996 group. The response for three-year graduates was 33%. This was 21% higher than that for the 1993 graduates.

In terms of the questionnaire, the first question asked the graduates to identify the goals that were important for them while studying at the HUC and to identify those that they accomplished as a result of studying there. Table 2 shows that there were five (5) goals identified both as expected and achieved by more than 50% of most of the graduates:

- prepare for a profession
- increase knowledge and understanding of an academic field
- receive a degree or certificate
- improve knowledge, technical skills, or competencies for the job or career
- formulate plans or goals

Those goals can be considered academic goals. However, the greatest gains occurred in goals that relate more to personal development rather than academic skills, and which were not expected by a high number of graduates. These were:

- develop the ability to be independent, self-sufficient , and adaptable
- increase self-confidence
- learn skills to enrich their lives or to make them a better person
- improve leadership skills

Table 2

Percentage Distribution of 1993-1997 Alumni by Expected/Achieved Goals (50% or More of the Graduates)

Important Goals	1993		1994		1995		1996		1997	
	Expected	Achieved	Expected	Achieved	Expected	Achieved	Expected	Achieved	Expected	Achieved
1. Prepare for a profession.	94	60	60	--	79	--	83	62	83	62
2. Increase knowledge and understanding of an academic field.	87	71	56	--	79	61	77	63	77	63
3. Receive a certificate or degree.	86	70	56	--	75	57	83	68	83	68
4. Develop the ability to be independent, self-sufficient, and adaptable.	79	70	50	--	–	**[71]**	–	**[75]**	52	**[75]**
5. Formulate professional plans or goals.	59	53			--	–	54	**[59]**	54	**[59]**
6. Improve knowledge, technical skills or competencies for the job or career.	--	**[71]**			57	**[68]**	56	**[71]**	56	**[71]**
7. Meet people and improve their ability to relate to others.	--	--			50	**[64]**	57	--	54	**[69]**
8. Increase self-confidence.	--	**[67]**					--	**[63]**	50	**[63]**
9. Learn skills to enrich their lives or to make them a better person.	--	**[64]**			--	**[71]**	--	**[64]**	53	**[64]**
10. Improve leadership skills.					--	**[68]**			--	**[53]**
11. Increase opportunities for promotion or salary raise.									--	**[57]**

Note: Bold numbers in brackets represent the percentage of graduates who surpassed their own expectations in achievement of the goals.

Graduates evaluated their academic experience at the HUC. As Table 3 shows, they indicated that they developed the following skills **a lot**:

- work independently
- follow directions
- work collaboratively in groups
- be persistent with difficult tasks
- define, solve problems, and make decisions

Graduates consider that they developed the following skills **somewhat**:

- understand and apply computer literacy concepts
- understand and appreciate the arts
- understand and apply scientific principles and methods
- take care of their physical and mental health
- understand different philosophies and cultures
- speak effectively in English

Table 3

Alumni Evaluation of their Academic Experience at the HUC, Alumni from 1993 to 1997

SKILLS DEVELOPED AT THE HUC	YEARS				
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Write effectively in Spanish	3.5	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.5
Write effectively in English	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.0	3.1
Speak effectively in Spanish	3.5	3.5	3.3	3.4	3.5
Speak effectively in English	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.9	3.0
Comprehension of written material in Spanish	3.5	3.5	3.3	3.5	3.5
Comprehension of written material in English	3.1	3.2	3.1	3.2	3.2
Work independently	3.7	3.6	3.5	3.6	3.6
Manage personal and family finances	3.2	3.3	3.1	3.0	3.0
Self-learning	3.3	3.3	3.5	3.2	3.1
Understand graphic information	2.9	2.9	2.9	3.2	3.0
Use Library resources	3.3	3.2	3.4	3.4	3.3
Follow directions	3.6	3.6	3.5	3.6	3.6
Understand issues that affect you as consumer	3.1	3.1	2.8	3.1	3.1
Take care of your physical and mental health	2.9	2.9	3.0	2.9	2.9
Work collaboratively in groups	3.5	3.4	3.6	3.7	3.7
Manage time effectively	3.4	3.4	3.6	3.4	3.3
Be aware of your rights, duties, and privileges as citizen	3.4	3.4	3.3	3.3	3.4
Understand and apply mathematics in your daily life	3.1	3.1	3.0	3.1	3.0
Understand different philosophies and cultures	2.9	2.9	2.8	3.0	3.0
Be persistent with difficult tasks	3.6	3.6	3.4	3.6	3.6
Define and solve problems and make decisions	3.6	3.6	3.4	3.7	3.7
Understand man's interaction with his environment	3.1	3.1	2.8	3.2	3.2
Direct and lead others	3.3	3.3	3.3	3.3	3.4
Identify hypotheses, make inferences and draw correct conclusions	3.2	3.2	3.3	3.3	3.3
Understand and appreciate the arts	2.8	2.8	2.7	2.8	2.8
Understand and apply scientific principles and method	2.7	2.7	3.0	3.0	2.8
Understand and apply computer literacy concepts	2.4	2.5	-	2.8	2.8
	N = 70	N = 87	N = 28	N = 136	N = 106

A lot (4), somewhat (3), very little (2), in no degree (1).

Graduates assessed most of the different College services and its environment **as good**. They rated as **excellent** the quality and the content of courses in their majors (3.6). They rated as **average** the parking facilities (2.0), career placement services (2.1), and athletic facilities (2.4). Table 4 presents these ratings.

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Table 4

Alumni Evaluation of the HUC and its Services, Alumni from 1993 to 1997

COLLEGE SERVICES AND ENVIRONMENT	YEARS				
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Teaching Process					
Teaching quality in general education courses	3.2	3.2	3.5	3.3	3.2
Teaching quality in courses of your major	3.6	3.5	-	3.6	3.5
Content of general education courses	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.2
Content of courses in your major	3.5	3.4	3.8	3.6	3.6
Grading system	3.2	3.2	3 2	3.2	3.3
Text	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.2	3.2
Exams, evaluation means, etc.	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.0	3.1
Faculty					
Dedication of professors in general education courses	3.2	3.1	3.2	3.2	3.2
Dedication of professors in your major	3.5	3.4	3.6	3.5	3.5
Teaching methods	3.2	3.1	3.2	3.2	3.2
Academic counseling	3.0	3.0	2.9	3.1	3.1
Attitude of professors toward students	3.1	3.1	2.9	3.0	3.2
Services					
Admission process	3.1	3.1	3.0	3.1	3.0
Registration process	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.6	2.6
Cashier	2.8	2.7	2.8	2.6	2.6
Student Aid	2.9	2.9	3.0	2.8	2.8
Counseling	2.7	2.7	2.9	2.7	2.7
Career Placement	2.2	2.1	1.8	2.2	2.1
Medical Services	2.7	2.7	2.5	2.5	2.5
Library	3.0	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.9
Computer Center	2.7	2.7	3.3	2.7	2.8
Cafeteria.	2.6	2.6	2.7	2.6	2.7
Social and cultural activities	2.9	2.9	3.1	2.9	2.9
Athletic Activities	2.7	2.6	2.5	2.6	2.6
Summer session	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.6	2.6
Student services in general	2.8	2.7	2.8	2.8	2.8
Physical Activities					
Classrooms	2.6	2.6	2.7	2.6	2.5
Theater	3.0	3.0	2.9	2.7	2.7
Auditoriums	2.7	2.7	2.6	2.5	2.5
Equipment and teaching laboratories	2.6	2.5	2.7	2.7	2.6
Equipment and computing laboratories	2.6	2.6	2.9	2.9	2.8
Atletic facilities	2.6	2.5	2.2	2.4	2.4
Parking facilities	2.1	2.1	2.0	1.8	1.8
Facilities for the handicapped	2.5	2.5	2.9	2.5	2.5
Physical facilities in general	2.7	2.7	2.6	2.6	2.6
	N = 70	N = 87	N = 28	N = 136	N = 106

Excellent (4), good (3), regular (2), poor (1).

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In general, graduates indicate that they are **satisfied** with the HUC. They also indicate that studying here **definitely** improved the quality of their lives. Table 5 illustrates these findings.

Table 5

Alumni Evaluation of the HUC 1993 to 1997

EVALUATION OF HUC AND ITS SERVICES	YEARS				
	1993	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**	**1997**
Level of satisfaction with the Humacao College *[Very satisfied (5), satisfied (4), neutral (3), dissatisfied (2), very unsatisfied (1)]*	4.3	4.2	4.2	4.4	4.4
Studying at the Humacao College improved the quality of their lives. *[Definitely (5), probably (4), undecided (3), probably not (2), definitely no (1)]*	4.7	4.5	4.6	4.7	4.7
	N=70	**N=87**	**N=28**	**N=136**	**N=106**

Focus Groups. To improve the quality of the response we conducted three (3) focus groups: one session with 1994 graduates and two sessions with 1997 graduates. Table 6 presents the participation of the graduates in the focus groups.

Table 6

Distribution of Attendance to Focus Groups 1994-1997 Alumni

Graduation Class	Sample	Attendants	%
1994	25	4	16
1997	30	12	40

Main findings for the focus groups:

- Out of 16, 11 (69%) indicate that they still like their professions after the job experience
- 10 (62%) are employed in their fields
- 10 (62%) received additional training for the jobs they were hired for
- 15 (94%) were unsatisfied with their salaries

Even though we expected a higher attendance to the focus groups, we were pleased with the quality of the response from our graduates. As an example, we think that some of their responses to the first question, ***"Do you still like your profession after your experience at work?"*** are highly relevant:

> Industrial Chemist: ***"I like it, but it is not what I expected. I think that any trained person can do the job***".
>
> Occupational Therapist: *"I like it, but I am not employed in my field. Other graduates are working as Occupational Therapy Assistants, even though they do not have the credentials. They do the same job under a different title such as Recreational Therapist."*
>
> Social Worker: *"I like it, but there is a false expectation about what we would in the agencies [where we work]. They tell us [in the program] that we are agents of change, but we are not. The agencies want to change us violating our professional ethics. People who do not have the professional training do our work. An example are custodians in the Courts of Justice. On the other hand some graduates have simple jobs that any high school graduate can do."*
>
> Biologist: *"I like it. I think it gave me the basic tools in the science area. I think they should revise and update it, [the Program] specifically with more computers..."*
>
> Secretary: *"I am not working as a secretary, but as office coordinator in a private company. I think the professors [in the department of Office Systems Administration] are excellent. I suggest that they update the curriculum.*

Besides this, 1994/1997 graduates provided useful information in terms of aspects of their majors that could be improved, courses that should be added, eliminated or updated, and some input in terms of what the future evolution of their profession would be according to their job experience.

Employers Interviews. We interviewed only 21 employers. To set the interviews we made 280 telephone calls or 13.3 calls for each interview. Table 7 presents the employers' ratings of the general performance of our graduates:

Table 7

Employers' Rating of HUC Graduates' Performance

AREAS ASSESSED	RATINGS
1. Attendance	3.8
2. Punctuality	3.7
3. Initiative	3.8
4. Ability to follow directions	3.7
5. Team-work ability	3.8
6. Receptive to supervision	3.9
7. Receptive to in-service training	3.8
8. Receptive to professional improvement and training	3.8
9. Interpersonal relations	3.7
10. Respect for safety rules	3.6
11. Respect for general organizational rules	3.7
12. General attitude toward the job	3.8
13. Technical knowledge of job	3.8
14. Expertise in the use of equipment required for the job	3.8
15. Verbal communication in Spanish	3.8
16. Written communication in Spanish	3.6
17. Verbal communication in English	2.7
18. Written communication in English	2.6
19. Quantity of work produced	3.7
20. Quality of work produced	3.8

- Over 80% of the employers interviewed rated our graduates as **good/very good** in almost all the areas we were assessing.

- Between 10 and 38 percent rated them as **average/poor** in the following areas:

  - follow safety rules (10%)
  - Verbal communication in English (30%)
  - written communication in English (38%)

- Fifteen (15) 71% of the employers interviewed rated as **very high** their level of satisfaction with the job performance of our graduates; six (6) 29% rated it as **high**.

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The employers provided us with a list of strengths and weaknesses of our graduates as employees in their organizations. They also provided specific recommendations to improve our programs. This is probably the part that will be most useful for the curricular revisions of our academic programs.

Graduate Schools. Out of 86 graduate schools, we visited 5 (6%). In some of them we interviewed the director of the graduate program and in others we interviewed a staff member who was responsible for admissions and registration of the graduate candidate.

The major findings for this component were:

One (1) out of five (5) told us the amount of students they admitted from our College.

One (1) told us how our students compared with other graduate students in terms of their preparation.

Two (2) told us the amount of our graduates who completed a graduate program.

Three (3) of them rated our graduates as **very good/good** in many of the areas assessed in our instrument.

Three (3) rated our graduates as **average/poor** in the following areas: written communication skills in English, research skills, and ability to work in-groups and independently.

Three (3) of them indicated a high level of satisfaction with the performance of our graduates in the graduate courses.

Like employers, the personnel of the graduate schools identified strengths and weaknesses of our graduates for conducting graduate studies. They also provided specific recommendations to improve the academic background of our students. Those recommendations will be sent to our programs for their attention.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We are quite pleased with the results and the information collected with this second cycle of our Alumni Study. We managed to increase both the quantity and the quality of the response. We can point out the following major accomplishments:

1. Successful combination of research techniques:

   - Questionnaire: Institutional and Program Assessment
   - Focus groups
   - Personal interviews

2. Graduates response increased:

   - One-year graduates

     1995 - 28%
     1997 - 41%

   - Three-year graduates

     1993 - 12%
     1994 - 33%

3. Faculty participation increased:

   - 1995 - 6 departments (46%)
   - 1996 - 10 departments (77%)
   - 1997 - 12 departments (92%)

4. First institutional Study of Employers and Graduate Schools

In general terms, the response of our graduates, their employers/supervisors, and professors/staff at graduate level shows that they perform at a satisfactory level. Employers, supervisors, and professors point out that we could improve their preparation in terms of verbal and written communication skills both in English and Spanish, critical analysis, computer, research, and skills for collaborative work and independent study.

For us, the most important gain from this whole process was that the three groups: graduates, employers/supervisors, and graduate directors/professors helped us identify the strengths/weaknesses of our academic programs and provided useful recommendations to improve the academic preparation of our alumni. This is what makes this whole task a real assessment experience.

There are a few things we will improve in our next cycle of the Alumni Study, which will be in three years. In terms of the focus groups we thought we would be able to make, at least, two focus groups with each class. We managed to organize only one. Although graduates had confirmed their attendance, we had a low response for those. This means that we will have to leave more time for the organization of the focus groups.

We will post our Alumni Questionnaire in the web site of our Institution in the Internet. In this way, alumni may respond directly to the survey through the Internet.

The idea of the Employer/Graduate School Study was good, but it was a real challenge. We thought we could use a commercial directory, but we had to make it from scratch. We think that it is easier to mail a questionnaire to employers/supervisors of those same graduates.

Graduate schools on the Island do not gather data about their students. They are concerned only with fulfillment of admission requirements. We will recommend our programs to follow-up their own alumni at graduate level.

It has been a hard year, but we are convinced that the combination of research techniques such as the written survey, the personal interviews, and the focus groups allowed us to overcome the challenge of low response rates in our Alumni Study.

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Footnotes

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[1] George Keller (1983). Academic Strategy – The Management Revolution in American Higher Education (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press), Page 129.

[2] See James O. Nichols, (1995). A Practitioner's Handbook for Institutional Effectiveness and Student Outcomes Assessment Implementation (3rd ed.); Assessment Case Studies: Common Issues in Implementation with Various Campus Approaches to Resolution; and The Departmental Guide and Record Book for Student Outcomes and Institutional Effectiveness (2nd ed.). Edison, NJ: Agathon Press.

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